

## Connecting With The Community

You can't judge the state of a person's heart by what you see on the outside. The New Testament is full of examples of individuals or groups of people who were very open to the Gospel, but you wouldn't have picked that by their occupation or their social status. Tax collectors. Senior Roman officers. Members of the government. Today's scripture concerns a group of people Jews wouldn't have anything to do with, and a man who was powerful, prosperous and very influential. Both the group of people, and the individual, had been prepared for the Gospel message by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit not only created a spiritual hunger in their hearts, but he set up a Divine appointment so that at exactly the right time, the right person was in the right place to introduce them to Jesus.

### Receptive Groups

This chapter is about Philip, a Greek speaking Jew, taking the Gospel first to the Samaritans and then to an individual from North Africa. These are not people he would naturally have related to. The Jews hated the Samaritans. As far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were heretics. Historically, the Samaritans grew out of the remnant left behind when the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon. They intermarried with foreigners who had settled in the places left by those taken captive. So the Samaritans were half breeds, who failed to practice true Judaism. What made matters worse was that on Mt Gerazim, they set up a rival temple to the one in Jerusalem. The Jewish scriptures prohibited setting up another temple, so the Samaritans rejected all the Jewish scriptures except the first five books. Can you see now why the Jews hated them so much? These people had intermarried with pagans. They had set up an alternative worship place, and they rejected a large part of the Jewish scriptures. Such was the hatred between Jews and Samaritans that Jews would detour right around their territory rather than meet one of them. The last time James and John had contact with Samaritans, they asked Jesus for permission to call down fire from heaven on them. They wanted to nuke them. And the feeling was mutual. The Samaritans hated the Jews too.

But Philip went to these people and talked about Jesus. And guess what? They didn't kill him. They believed his message and followed Christ. Such was the work of the Holy Spirit through Philip that revival broke out. Samaritans were choosing to follow Christ. People were getting healed. Evil spirits were being driven out. The power of God was being shown all over the place. It was boom time. The Apostles heard about the revival and sent Peter and John to investigate. They too saw the power of God at work amongst the Samaritans and they got involved. Even John, who had wanted to nuke the Samaritans, finished up preaching to them. But the key player in this whole thing was Philip. Then right in the middle of this revival the Lord speaks to Philip.

### When God Says "Go" ...

***"Now an Angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (Acts 8:26 New International Version)*** That's the New International Version. The Human response Version could have read ***"And Philip said to the Lord 'Not now Lord. Can't you see I'm in the middle of a revival? Hundreds of people are choosing to follow Jesus. Your timing is way off. I'll go, but not now'"*** (Acts 8: 27 – The Human Response Version). Or the next verse could have read ***"And Philip said to the Lord 'Not me Lord. There are all those Apostles sitting on their hands in Jerusalem. They were given the Great Commission too. Why can't one of them go? All they do is come up here to Samaria to see if I'm doing this Samaritan mission right. Why can't one of them go? I'm indispensable here. If I abandon the preaching to the Samaritans, how are they going to get saved?"*** (Acts 8: 27 – The Human Response Version) It could have also read like this: ***"And Philip said to the Lord 'Not there Lord. It's a desert. Nobody lives down there. It makes more sense to stick with where the people are. Here I am surrounded by people who want to hear the gospel, and you want me to leave all this to go to a desert? Samaria is where all the action is happening, not out in the desert'".*** (Acts 8: 27 – The Human Response Version)

Does any of this sound a bit familiar to you? The Lord says “Go” and we say “Not yet”. He says “You go” and we say “Send someone else – I’m too busy doing important stuff”. He says “Go to the desert” and we say “What for? That’s a dumb idea. It doesn’t make any sense”.

### **Receptive Individuals**

What Philip didn’t know was that the Holy Spirit was preparing to open up the whole of Africa to the Gospel.? Out in the desert he led the first African to Christ.

***“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, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet”.***  
***(Acts 8:27-28 NIV)***

This is what we call a Divine appointment. It’s a rendezvous organised by the Holy Spirit. The man that Philip was to meet was a very powerful, wealthy and influential man. He came from what is now northern Sudan where he served in the court of the Queen, who ruled the country. He was the royal treasurer. In other words, he was number two in the nation. Basically he ran the country on her behalf. For some time the Holy Spirit had been creating a spiritual hunger in his heart. He was so spiritually open that he was prepared to travel about 1500 kilometres each way through a desert, in a chariot, to worship in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem he bought a rare copy of the Hebrew scriptures to study on the way home. Whether he knew Hebrew, and was reading it himself, or whether he had a slave reading it to him, it was being read aloud while he was travelling in his chariot. In those days, silent reading hadn’t been invented. People read out loud. Let’s pick up the story again.

***“The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 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. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”***

***The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:29 -35)***

### **Influential People**

Every day you and I meet influential people. We may not know how they are influential, but some of them are influential in their workplaces. Some of them are grandmothers who are influential with their grandchildren. Some of them are influential students in their classrooms at school. Some of them are influential in their sports teams. Some of them are mothers and fathers who have influence over their kids. Their decisions have far reaching effects in the lives of others. There are people who follow their example. If they came to follow Christ, others would follow their lead. Don’t you think it likely that the Holy Spirit has been working on a strategy for people like us to find those influential people that are spiritually hungry? Don’t you think that the Spirit of God might speak to us, as he spoke to Philip? Don’t you think he might want to set up some Divine appointments for us with people like this? If we look at the way the Holy Spirit spoke to Philip, we will see some principles to follow that will allow the Holy Spirit to use us to speak to influential people about Jesus.

#### **1. Be Obedient.**

When the angel told Philip to leave the Samaritans to go to the desert, it didn’t seem to make a lot of sense, but he did it. When he was told to approach the chariot of this man, he did it. It was a brave thing to do, for this man would have been surrounded by an armed escort, and lots of protective servants. It takes courage to approach an important person. Often people will say that we need Holy Spirit boldness in order to witness for Christ. Yes we do need Holy Spirit boldness, but before we need the

boldness, we need the obedience. It's no use asking the Holy Spirit to make us bold if we are not prepared to be obedient to His promptings.

When I was Pastor of a church in Switzerland I preached on this scripture. I talked about looking for those Divine appointments where we can talk about Jesus with people we meet. One of the women in our church was a Swiss single woman named Catherine who decided to trust God and put this into practice. Catherine had been a senior flight attendant with EasyJet, but she had to give up her job for health reasons. On her last flight, from Tel Aviv to Geneva, she asked permission of the captain to get on the intercom and make a little farewell speech to the passengers and crew. So she told the passengers, most of whom were Israelis, how she had come to know Jesus as Messiah. She told them how much God loved them, and that God had given her such a love for Jewish people. She said to me "You know David, when I had finished, everybody clapped!"

Because she couldn't fly anymore, she got a job in the VIP lounge at Geneva airport. Catherine used to pray and ask the Lord to give her opportunities to speak about Jesus. One day, in the VIP lounge she spotted Koffi Anan, the UN Secretary General, sitting on his own before he boarded his plane before going off to Syria to try and negotiate a peace deal. She was praying for him and felt the Holy Spirit prompt her to go over and talk to him. So she did. She told him that God loved what he was doing as a peacemaker and that she would be praying for him. He was very open to what she was saying, and thanked her for her prayers.

A couple of weeks later she spotted Koffi Anans chauffeur in the VIP lounge. She asked about him and the chauffeur said "He's out there on the tarmac on his plane. Why don't you go out and talk to him as he doesn't fly for another 30 minutes" So she did. He remembered her, and she told him she had been praying for him. She was able to pray for him on his plane before he took off. How did that happen? It happened because Catherine was obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

## 2. Cross Cultures.

Philip was a Greek speaking Jew. He had taken one step and taken the gospel to the Samaritans. Now he took another big step to explain the gospel to a black African. You and I have this amazing opportunity to spread the gospel around the world without even leaving home. We are surrounded by people from all nations and cultures and when we lead someone to Christ from a different culture, we are planting the seeds of the gospel in places where we could never take them ourselves. In Palmerston North we had a Chinese congregation as part of our church. Each year there were numbers of Chinese who found Christ. Most of them would go back to China and join house churches. I found that many of them were taking my Sunday sermons, and emailing them back to their friends and family and house churches in China. Thanks to the internet, I was preaching to a far larger congregation than the one I had in front of me. We have this huge opportunity before us to bring the gospel to the nations of the world, just by speaking about Christ to people of other cultures.

## 3. Look For People Who Are Spiritually Open.

Not everyone is, but there are some who are being softened by the Holy Spirit. They are just waiting for a Philip to come and explain where Jesus fits in to the larger picture. When Jesus sent out the 70 to preach the good news, he commanded, ***"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him. ... Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you. ... Do not move around from house to house. ... Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you,'"***(Luke 10:5-9, NIV). Jesus told us to look for a certain sort of person. Look for a person Jesus called "A man of peace". A man of peace is a person who is spiritually open. It's a person whose heart has been prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive the gospel. The Ethiopian official was a person like that. Do you see how much difference it makes if we are directed by the Spirit in these divine appointments? The Spirit prepares the heart of a person. Then he prompts us to go. The prayer to pray when we are meeting these influential people is "Lord, show me

the man of peace. Where is the person who is spiritually seeking?” That’s a whole different approach than thinking we have to push the gospel message on everyone we meet. Instead of us making all the effort, we are opening ourselves to the direction of the Spirit, so that we are asking him to direct us to the people he has been working on. If we learn how to be obedient to his promptings, we will find people who want to know about Jesus.

#### **4. Start Where They Are At.**

Philip started his gospel presentation from where the Ethiopian was, that is, with the question whether the eunuch understood what he was reading. Then he gave the eunuch an opportunity to ask another question. Too often we just want to tell people what we want them to know, rather than giving them what they want to know. That’s one of the reasons why the Alpha Course has been so hugely successful in introducing people to Jesus. It allows people to ask their questions. Some of the questions that come out in an Alpha course are real issues for people. How can I trust the Bible? Was Jesus who he really claimed to be? Why doesn’t God answer my prayers? The question that Philip asked the Ethiopian official was a great question “Do you understand what you are reading?” It’s still a great question today.

#### **5. Talk About Jesus.**

Philip used the scriptures to bring this man to understand who Jesus was. Our presentation of the gospel must always be based on Scripture. We may not necessarily quote verses of scripture if the person we are talking to doesn’t accept the authority of the Bible, but we can still talk about what the Bible says. And the purpose of referring to the scripture is that we want people to understand who Jesus is, and how his death on the Cross and his resurrection can bring new life to us and to the world.

#### **6. Expect A Response.**

The Ethiopian responded to the message by being baptized. Not everyone will respond to the gospel immediately. Some people need time to think it through. But often people miss out on the new life in Christ because we don’t ask for or expect a response to the gospel. It’s good to dialogue, but the dialogue needs to result in decision. If the Holy Spirit has been at work, we can expect a response.

#### **7. Pray For Divine Appointments.**

This passage of scripture ends with the Ethiopian official going on his way rejoicing. Think about some of the influential people you know. The people you meet socially. The people you work with. Have you ever prayed for any of them and asked the Lord to show you which one is a “man of peace?” When did you last pray “Holy Spirit, set me up with a Divine appointment today?” Wouldn’t that be a wonderful adventure, to go through a day, meeting people and asking the Lord “Is this the one that you have prepared for me today?” In these closing moments, let’s take a moment to be quiet before the Lord. Let’s listen to the Holy Spirit. Let’s tell him we will be obedient. Let’s pray about the influential people we will meet. And then let’s see what God does with us this week as we are directed by the Spirit.

### **Prayer**