



“Crossing Barriers”

Acts 8:26–40

What does “all means all” look like in practice?

It took some guts for the apostles to reach across barriers as they sought to spread the Good News, bringing others into our oneness in Christ. In this week’s story, an angel and the Holy Spirit thrust Philip into the presence of a man who could hardly be more different from Philip. The man is an Ethiopian.

He is a high-ranking royal court official. And he is a eunuch. Philip is to explain the Scriptures to this stranger, for the family of Christ is offered to all . . . to all. Here is the long lead-up to that meeting.

A promise made and kept

The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are two volumes of a single literary work. Together, they tell the story of Jesus and the early church spanning more than six decades. The hinge point of the two volumes, ending the first and beginning the second, is Jesus’ ascension, i.e., his return to the Father. Before disappearing into the clouds, Jesus tells the gathered disciples that “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” (Acts 1:8). This command from Jesus wasn’t new, but a reiteration of a promise made long before.

God makes many promises in Scripture. God promises Noah that never again will he destroy all life with a flood (Genesis 9:11). God promises Moses that he will rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6:2-8). Jesus promises his disciples (that’s us too!) that the Father would send the Spirit of God to help them and be with them forever (John 14:16).

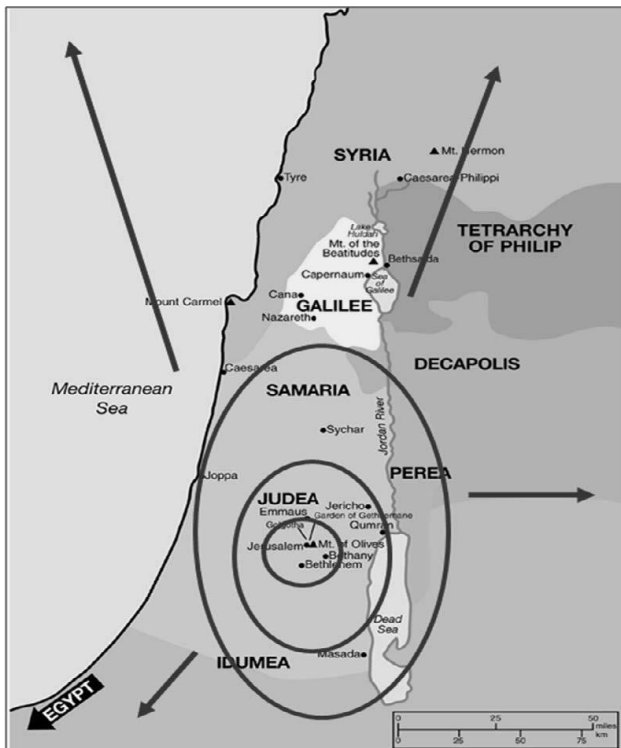
God made some wonderful promises to Abraham as well. God will make Abraham’s family into a great nation. God will make Abraham’s name great. But the promise to Abraham that shapes all of God’s subsequent promises is this: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3). This is the purpose of it all; the end to which the other promises point. One day, all the nations will come to God.

God did not choose Abraham merely for Abraham’s own sake. God did not save the Israelites from Egypt merely for their own sake. Rather, this was how God set about to renew and redeem all of humanity and all of creation from the damage wrought by the humans’ rebellion in the Garden of Eden. When the children of Abraham, i.e., the people of God, heard God well, they understood that they were God’s “treasured possession” and “holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6) so that they could be the ones through whom God would rescue his good creation. More than 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah (4:1-5) spoke of a time when the nations would “go up to the mountain of the LORD,” beating their “swords into plowshares” and their “spears into pruning hooks.”

Strangely, the followers of Jesus claimed that in his death and resurrection, God had kept his promise, he had been faithful to his covenant with Israel. Peter and the disciples, Jews themselves, claimed that Jesus was not only the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but also the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus is not only, they said, the savior of Israel but the savior of the world. The time had come to fulfill the promise made long before to Abraham. Jesus’ disciples were to “make disciples of all nations,” (Matthew 28:19) and to be Jesus’ “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

“To Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth”

As illustrated by the map on the next page, you can think of Jesus’ geographic instructions in terms of concentric circles that center on Jerusalem and then extend outward to Judea and then Samaria and then all the world.



Acts 1-7 concentrates on the work in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit arrives during the festival of Pentecost and Peter rises to preach a stirring sermon in the temple courtyards. 3,000 come to faith in Jesus Christ that day.

As the new community begins their life together, they devote themselves to learning and fellowship, to sharing meals and prayers. Peter and John not only teach, they perform miracles (Acts 3). They are arrested and released (Acts 4). The community learns what it means to be a Spirit-formed people with whom God, in the person of the Spirit, is present. Two people not only test the Spirit, but they lie to the Holy Spirit as well. They both die as a result (Acts 5).

As the community grows, organization is needed and the apostles tap Stephen and others to see to the daily needs of the community, freeing the apostles to pray, to preach, and to teach (Acts 6). This same Stephen is also arrested and then stoned to death (Acts 7). The Holy Spirit is the one at the center of action across these stories. The Spirit is referred to 23 times just in the first seven chapters of Acts.

In chapter 8, Luke tells us that after Stephen’s stoning and the severe persecution that followed, the believers do not back off. Instead, Philip heads north into Samaria to preach the Good News. Samaria was not Jewish, though the Jews understood them to be like distant cousins who had removed themselves from the proper worship of God. Many Samaritans respond to the word and Peter and John head to Samaria to make sure that the people are properly baptized and received the Holy Spirit, who is God’s gift to all believers (Acts 8:14-17). Not surprisingly, the apostles must teach the Samaritans and, in particular, a man named Simon that the Good News is neither magic nor is it for sale.

You’d think that Philip would get a rest, but no. One of God’s angels shows up and tells Philip to head back toward Jerusalem and make his way south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On the road there is an Ethiopian eunuch,¹ a man of very high status, the “Secretary of the Treasury,” to the Ethiopian queen. Here is Will Willimon’s description of the man:

The eunuch Philip encounters on the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza is described in considerable detail. Contrary to popular interpretation, he need not be a castrated male who was excluded from the temple (Deut. 23:1). [The word was used on occasion simply to refer to a high court official.] Rather, we are reading a story about an important man, a foreigner, though possibly a Jew, a powerful person who has much power and authority as the queen’s minister— except the power to understand the word of God. Yet he is willing to be instructed by Philip in “the good news of Jesus” (8:35).

Luke’s audience would be fascinated with this Ethiopian. In the Greco-Roman world the term “Ethiopian” was often applied to black people. The *Odyssey* speaks of “far-off Ethiopians ... the furthestmost of men” (1:22–23). In other words, here is a person from an exotic land, the edge of the world, timbaktu, someone whose dark skin made him an object of wonder and admiration among Jews and Romans (cf. F. M. Snowden). This warns us not to consider the Ethiopian as a despised or deprived person—quite the opposite. He is a powerful, though exotic, court official, a well-placed and significant person who is receptive to the truth. He beseeches Philip to interpret for him and then to baptize him. Here is an earnest inquirer who reaches out and is graciously included into the actions of God.

¹ Eunuchs often held important position in ancient middle-eastern kingdoms because they couldn’t have children on whose behalf they would conspire against their employer.

He is converted and asks what hinders him from baptism. Perhaps we have here in the word “hindered” a fragment of the early baptismal liturgy which asks of a candidate, “What hinders this person from being baptized?” an affirmation of the inclusiveness and graciousness of baptism (cf. Cullman, pp. 71–78). Whether or not this is the case, Luke certainly places this baptism at a strategic position in his narrative. The baptism of the Ethiopian official is situated between the baptism of Samaritans and, in chapter 10, the baptism of a gentile. The Ethiopian’s religious status before baptism is left in doubt—we do not know for sure that he is a Jew, possibly he is a “God fearer” or proselyte, but we do not believe he could be a gentile. Luke leaves us with the impression that in the unhindered baptism of this man the evangelistic thrust has moved from Jew, to Samaritan, out to the boundaries of the world, at last to the threshold of the gentiles. Psalm 68:31 is fulfilled, “... Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out her hands to God.”²

The Spirit then tells Philip to run over to the chariot. After being directed to this place by an angel and now the Spirit, Philip surely grasps that this man is the one whom God wants him to meet. The eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asks the man if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch replies that he can’t, for there is no one to guide him. So Philip sits down with the man and helps him to see that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 has come and it is Jesus. Then, the man orders the chariot to stop so that he and Philip could go down to the water’s edge. There, Philip baptizes him. Then, surely to the eunuch’s astonishment, the Spirit transports Philip to Azotus, which is ancient Ashdod and is about 23 miles north-northeast of Gaza.

What is most important for us to grasp in these stories is that the Spirit of God is the one who is guiding things along and making things happen. The Good News is to spread ever outward and we are not speaking only of geography. The Spirit is making all humanity into one race, reborn in Christ.

The Good News has spread from the Jews to the despised Samaritans and now to this Ethiopian. He has made a long pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which in itself was a measure of devotion among the Jews. The man studies Scripture as well as he can and worshipped the Lord God as well as he could, for eunuchs were not allowed in the temple. If he was physically castrated, as seems likely, he could never be a Jew, no matter his devotion to God (Deut. 23:1). The irony here is that the man is one of the outcasts he reads about in Isaiah, where God promises that even the “eunuchs who keep the Sabbath” and “hold fast to the covenant” will be given an “everlasting name that will not be cut off” (56:3-8). It is through Christ that this outcast is brought into the people of God.

God made a promise. God has kept that promise. And now God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, is working through his people to see that through the proclaiming of the Good News, truly, all the families of the earth will be blessed. For just ahead in the story lies Peter’s encounter with a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, who will be the first “fully-Gentile” person to come to faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 10).

² William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 71–72.