

“Unless Someone Guides Me”: Acts 8 and the Watchtower

Robert M. Bowman, Jr.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Philip’s discussion with the Ethiopian in Acts 8 shows that Christians today ought to accept humbly the Watchtower publications as divinely provided “guidance” for understanding the Scriptures. In this paper, I offer another perspective on this passage through a verse-by-verse commentary on Acts 8:26-36.

“But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, ‘Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a desert road.)” (Acts 8:26)

Some Witnesses have commented that “the angel was directing Philip as where to go and teach.” And I would agree. But how does this support the Jehovah’s Witness view of the organization as the conduit of authority and guidance in the interpretation of the Bible? I really think that it doesn’t.

Philip was one of the seven “deacons,” the seven men chosen to oversee the food distribution program in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6). After Stephen’s martyrdom the disciples, except for the apostles, were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). Among those who found themselves in Samaria was Philip, who took it upon himself—humanly speaking—to begin proclaiming Christ to the Samaritans (8:5). We know that Philip had not been humanly commissioned to take the gospel to the Samaritans, not only because he was forced to go there suddenly in the aftermath of Stephen’s death, but also because of what happened next: “Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-15). In other words, no provision had been made in Jerusalem for the gospel to be taken to the Samaritans; the apostles took action belatedly to welcome the new Samaritan believers into the fold as signified by the impartation of the Spirit in power only after learning about their conversion.

After Peter and John followed up on Philip’s impromptu evangelization in Samaria, an angel of the Lord told Philip to leave the Samaria area and travel south down to the desert road that ran between Jerusalem and Gaza. What should not be overlooked at this juncture is that Philip had just been at the same location as Peter and John; the Lord could just as easily have revealed to them that he wanted Philip to go on this next mission. But that isn’t how it happened. Philip’s mission is not directed through a human organization but through the angel of the Lord. The involvement of this angel marks the event as an exceptional one, a turning point in redemptive history. Angels do not usually appear to people to give them their itinerary for the day. We should look to this

passage, not for a model of how the Lord usually directs the work of preaching the gospel, but rather for an understanding of the Lord's willingness to work both inside and outside organizational or institutional parameters to bring salvation to people of all nations.

Please understand: there's nothing wrong with organizations sending people to preach the gospel; later in Acts the leaders of the church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Saul to take the gospel into Asia Minor (Acts 13:1-3). Acts is not anti-establishment or anti-organization in its teaching. But the idea that all faithful Christians must serve within a hierarchical religious organization, going where they are sent by those higher up the ladder, is at odds with this passage.

“So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and join this chariot.’” (Acts 8:27-29)

At this point in the Book of Acts, the Jerusalem church had not yet begun seeking to evangelize anyone but Jews. Again, the Jerusalem apostles had not commissioned the evangelization of the Samaritans; they entered that field of ministry belatedly after a food distribution supervisor had taken the lead. Paul had not yet been converted or received his apostolic commission (Acts 9), and Peter had not yet received the revelation that prompted him to take the gospel to a Gentile family for the first time (Acts 10-11). Philip's taking the gospel to the Samaritans was somewhat surprising, but at least, from the perspective of the Jews, Samaritans were believers in the God of Abraham and of Moses; their men were circumcised and their heritage Israelite.

But now Philip does something even more surprising: he goes out to a remote area and is directed by the Lord to a Gentile, an Ethiopian (v. 27). Although this Ethiopian was a believer in the God of Israel, as is evident from the fact that he was returning from Jerusalem after visiting there to worship (v. 28), he was still a Gentile. There simply was no warrant in the apostolic “policies” up to this point for Philip to preach the gospel to such a man. Peter, the leader of the apostles, would some months or a couple of years later have to be coaxed by the Lord in a vision into evangelizing Gentiles. And here Philip is evangelizing an Ethiopian—a man whose lack of Jewish ancestry could be noted from a distance. (Ethiopians were noted in ancient times as having the darkest skin of any ethnic group known in the Mediterranean world.) Yet his doing so was authorized by God; the “commission” to go to this Ethiopian came from the Spirit (v. 29).

In Jehovah's Witness teaching, what Philip did could fairly be described as “running ahead of Jehovah's organization.” Philip had no authorization from Jerusalem for offering the gospel to an uncircumcised Gentile; it would be months, possibly a couple of years, before the Jerusalem apostles, with some reluctance, officially opened the door to Gentiles. But Jehovah's Witnesses are taught to follow the teachings of their religious organization and not to think or act in religious matters independently of that organization. If an individual Witness thinks that the organization's policy should be different from what it is, he is supposed to support the policy and wait for Jehovah to direct the organization to make whatever changes he deems fit. To ignore the current policy and act on one's personal beliefs contrary to that policy is described as “running ahead of Jehovah's organization” and is viewed as disloyal both to the organization and to

Jehovah God himself. Evidently, Philip was not part of such an organization; he went where he did because the Lord was directing him independent of any formal organizational commission or policy.

Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him” (Acts 8:30-31).

Some Witnesses have commented “that Philip questioned his ability to understand the Scriptures.” This is a fair observation, but it needs to be placed in context. Philip’s question is worded in such a way as to indicate that he *expected* a negative answer; we might even translate it, “You don’t understand what you are reading, do you?” But why did he expect a negative answer? Is it because the Ethiopian was not associated with “God’s channel,” the organization, apart from which no one can properly or completely understand the Scriptures?

No. This is not why Philip expected a negative answer. We will see later in the passage exactly why; but for now, let us focus on the Ethiopian’s answer, since Jehovah’s Witnesses stress this aspect of the passage in their argument that the Watchtower publications provide indispensable “guidance” for the interpretation of the Bible.

The Ethiopian did indeed indicate his need for guidance. However, he did *not* say that he needed an authoritative organization to inform him of the true and complete meaning of the Scriptures. And Acts gives us absolutely no indication that Philip informed the Ethiopian about an authoritative organization that was divinely responsible for the interpretation of Scripture.

Evangelicals do not dispute that people need the help of those who are already believers to hear and understand the gospel. We do not dispute that God works through such believers. The problem is that the Jehovah’s Witnesses use this text to support a claim to their organization having an exclusive role as the channel of Christian truth in our time.

One other point is worth noting: The Ethiopian was not at this point even a Christian. He was a Gentile, excluded from the Jewish people and as yet ignorant of Christ. He is asking for guidance, not as a believer in Christ seeking a full or completely accurate understanding of the Christian faith, but as someone devoutly seeking to worship the true God.

“Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

‘He was led as a sheep to slaughter;

And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,

So he does not open his mouth.

In humiliation his judgment was taken away;

Who will relate his generation?

For his life is removed from the earth.’

The eunuch answered Philip and said, ‘Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this?

Of himself or of someone else?’ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this

Scripture he preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:32-35).

Here we learn exactly why Philip could reasonably expect that the Ethiopian would not understand what he was reading. No one can adequately understand the Old Testament Scriptures without properly relating them to Jesus the Messiah. The Ethiopian needed someone to guide him because he needed someone to show him that the Scriptures he was trying to understand were fulfilled in Jesus, the Hope of Israel. The Old Testament does not refer directly and explicitly by name to Jesus; in order to know that it speaks about Jesus one must receive a witness from someone who knows about Jesus and can relate Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to the biblical promises of the Messiah. Indeed, the identity of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 was not only a mystery to Gentiles like the Ethiopian; his identity was also a mystery to Jews until and unless they recognized him in Jesus.

Luke made it clear in his Gospel that the Old Testament Scriptures could not be adequately understood and believed without relating them to Jesus. In the first public teaching of Jesus reported by Luke, Jesus reads from another "servant" passage in Isaiah 61 and announces, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21). At the end of his Gospel, Luke records Jesus twice affirming that the Scriptures were all about him:

"O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, he explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:25-26).

"Now He said to them, 'These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day...'" (Luke 24:44-46).

It is striking that just as Luke reported in the Gospel that Jesus, "beginning with Moses and with all the prophets," explained how they were about himself (Luke 24:27), now Luke says that Philip, "beginning from this Scripture" (in Isaiah), preached Jesus (Acts 8:35). The parallel underscores the fact that we are to understand what Philip is doing in the light of Jesus' claim in Luke 24 that the Old Testament Scriptures were all about him and could not really be understood except in relation to him.

The task of preaching in the Book of Acts focuses on presenting testimony and evidences showing that Jesus is the Messiah, the One to whom the entire Old Testament pointed. "This is what was spoken through the prophet" (Acts 2:16) is the core of the apostolic message. Jesus is the One! He is the Messiah, the son of David promised to Israel (Acts 2:25-36; 4:25-28); he is the prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22-26). He is the Son of Man of whom Daniel spoke (Acts 7:55-56). And, as Philip explained to the Ethiopian, Jesus is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:32-35).

The point in Acts 8, then, is **not that Christians cannot properly interpret the Bible apart from a religious organization** (let alone a hierarchical religious organization dispensing authoritative interpretations from the top down). The point, rather, is that **non-Christians will**

not understand the Old Testament apart from Jesus. To put it another way, the point is that no one who does not know Jesus as Messiah and Lord, as the royal servant who suffers for our sins, can properly understand the message of the Bible, in particular the Old Testament. In order to know Jesus in this way, one must have more than the Old Testament. One must have the post-resurrection witness to Jesus as the One who fulfills the Old Testament. In the church's first few years, this witness came exclusively through word of mouth, from the apostles and those who had heard the apostles' testimony and could effectively transmit it to others. Now that witness comes primarily and authoritatively through the New Testament, which gives us in permanent, publicly accessible form the inspired witness of the apostles to Jesus.

If we are to apply the exchange in Acts 8 to the contemporary situation, then, we should say that no one can understand the redemptive promises and message of the Old Testament apart from the revelation of its fulfillment in Jesus that has been provided for us in the New Testament. Of course, we also need to have living human witnesses who will take the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, to those who do not yet have them, and who will help non-Christians come to a saving knowledge of Jesus as Messiah and Lord from the Scriptures. But an authoritative organization issuing indispensable "guidance" to the proper interpretation of the New Testament is simply not on the horizon in Acts 8 and is in fact foreign to the whole teaching of the Book of Acts.

"As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" (Acts 8:36).

Some Witnesses have said, "So the Ethiopian humbly accepted Philip's explanation." This appears to reflect the Jehovah's Witness idea that the teachings issuing from the "faithful and discreet slave" are to be "humbly accepted." However, while I don't question the Ethiopian's humility (in a legitimate sense), that humility was not oriented toward an organization, but toward God. Luke is certainly not telling us to accept a teaching because it comes from a particular organization or religious group. The Ethiopian did not accept Philip's explanation on the grounds that Philip was an authorized representative of Jehovah's organization on earth. He accepted Philip's explanation because it was true!

It is correct to say that had the Ethiopian rejected Philip's explanation he would have missed the truth of the Scriptures. But this is precisely because Philip explained the Scriptures as fulfilled in Jesus. Rejecting Philip would only have been a problem insofar as it would have meant rejecting Philip's message that Jesus was the Christ. The gospel call is not "accept Jesus and God's organization" as represented, say, by Philip. The gospel call is a call to accept Jesus as the Messiah and Lord, the One who delivers us from our sins and through whom all of God's promises for restoration, blessing, and life are fulfilled.

Conclusion

There is no basis in Acts 8 for the Jehovah's Witness doctrine that a modern organization exists that is divinely authorized to provide indispensable guidance in the interpretation of the Bible. In fact, the implications of Acts 8 are very much at odds with the Watchtower doctrine. Philip preached the gospel to Samaritans without prior authorization from Jerusalem; he then did the

same when he preached the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch. In doing so, he was ahead of the Jerusalem apostolic leadership, which would not see its way clear for several months or a year to opening the gospel to Gentiles. The point of the exchange between Philip and the Ethiopian is not that an organization is needed to guide our interpretation of the Bible, but that the Bible, and in particular the Old Testament, cannot be understood except as fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.