
# 8

# EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

TED SMITH

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*Like a sheep he was led to slaughter,*
*and like a lamb silent before its shearer,*
*so he does not open his mouth.*

*In his humiliation justice was denied him.*
*Who can describe his generation?*
*For his life is taken away from the earth.*



The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, 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 snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26–39)

## Do You Understand What You Are Reading?

I serve two small-membership churches in a rural part of central New York State. The people in these congregations often remind me of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. He offers a wonderfully suggestive metaphor for the church: steward of the treasure of a great queen, African, faithful alien in Israel, traveler on a wilderness road, eunuch. He is an avid reader of Scripture. When Philip meets the eunuch, he is returning from worship and reading the prophet Isaiah. He is already reading, and already committed, in some way, to what he reads. But when Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" he says, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

It is the Ethiopian eunuch's relationship with Scripture that most reminds me of my congregations. The vast majority of the people in these two rural churches are already reading the Bible, or at least wanting to and feeling like they should. But these faithful readers frequently feel as if they do not understand what they are reading. Some read on. Some give up in frustration. Some reach out for guides of various kinds. But the experience of not understanding is widely shared.

A recent session meeting at Dundee crystallized this reality for me. The session was committed to making Bible study by every member a focal point for our church in 1998. Elders were excited about this idea; many of them expressed a deep desire for more Bible reading.

We agreed that providing some program of reading for people would be essential. Our presbytery was recommending Year of the Bible, a schedule of readings that helps the reader to read the whole Bible in one year. Session members reviewed the material, but some were concerned that it offered little commentary on the passages to help readers understand what they were reading. One elder, a retired missionary, asked, "Do we really need any earthly help understanding Scripture? Isn't the Holy Spirit enough?" The response of the others was strong and highly emotional. Stories poured forth from people about their experiences of reading and not understanding. People shared feelings of anger, guilt, frustration, and despair. One elder said, "I can read the whole Bible in a year. I have no doubt of that. But what is the point of reading and reading and never understanding?"

The reasons that people in Dundee and Weston give for why they don't understand the Bible tend to fall into one of two clusters. One set of explanations emphasizes cultural and historical distance between the biblical world and our own. A second, related explanation centers on lack of background knowledge. Readers feel as if they need to have read more of the Bible to understand what they are now reading, and they feel as if they need to have read more secondary materials. I think that these reasons have some validity. People give them because they have experienced the difference that overcoming them can make. I hesitate to suggest other reasons, out of respect for people's ability to understand their own lives, and fear that I will fall into the trap of the arrogant analyst. But I believe that at least two other reasons are at work.

Many readers—by no means all—lack the virtues required to be an understanding reader. In Bible studies I see a pervasive lack of attentiveness. Patience to read a passage a second or third or fourth time is rare. Openness to the Bible saying something strange, new, or disturbing is even more rare. Groups gathered around the Bible for study have great difficulty staying focused on the passage they are studying. Conversation quickly slips to topics in which group members feel more confident or it jumps all over the place as people fail to listen and respond to one another in their eagerness



to have their say. Without the disciplines required for good reading, people will make no more headway with a poem from our own time and country than they will with a psalm from long ago and far away.

Readers also feel they don't understand because they believe a passage of Scripture must "mean something" beyond what it says. What a passage "means" usually ends up being some kind of ethical or theological idea expressed in propositional language (for instance, the story of the binding of Isaac means that God wants our total devotion but rejects child sacrifice). This "Cult of Meaning" erodes the virtues necessary for good reading. Again and again I see people in Bible studies racing to discover the meaning and then discarding the passage once they feel they know what it means. Conversation and study center on the meaning rather than the now-irrelevant details of the passage. Once you know what a passage means, you can ignore what it says. As the "Cult of Meaning" robs readers of attentiveness and patience, it also blocks the openness that would allow them to hear a new word. What counts as a meaning is almost always *a* familiar proposition. Readers feel they know the general range of theological and ethical propositions that are true, and will not accept a candidate for meaning that does not fit this range. When a strange or new possibility is suggested, readers will say things like, "It can't mean that. There must be something else we don't understand."

This last statement suggests one of the ways in which the "Cult of Meaning" robs people of confidence in their ability to understand Scripture. When no familiar proposition can be found as the meaning of the passage, readers will then often assume that they don't understand. "Getting the meaning" has become the definition of understanding, and, even more, the definition of a satisfying encounter with Scripture. Given the kinds of writing that make up much of the bible, honest and attentive readers will very frequently fail to "get the meaning." When they believe they are not getting that particular kind of meaning, they begin to feel the anger, frustration, guilt, and despair that the Dundee elders were describing.

It is not only confidence that people lose. When the range of what

counts as a good encounter with Scripture is so limited, readers genuinely lose the ability to understand. When inklings of other kinds of understanding begin to emerge, they are often rejected out of hand. Readers refuse to do the kinds of understanding they are already capable of doing.

The "Cult of Meaning" I am trying to describe is a modern creation, a symptom of the scientism that prevails in our age. Propositional language has been elevated to ultimate status, the language that orders all other kinds of language. It needs no translation itself; it is the language into which all other kinds of language must be translated. The church has willingly participated in the elevation of propositional language and the establishment of the Cult of Meaning. Whole generations of Christians have grown up hearing sermons in which the main purpose was to translate Bible passages into propositions or to assert a proposition and support it with passages. Whether the preaching is expository or topical, the Cult of Meaning is served. Clergy and scholars, myself included, have been all too glad to move into the role of "meaning-giver." Readers have been glad not to understand the meaning of passages that would challenge established worldviews, values, beliefs, and lifestyles. We have helped create a church that reads but does not understand.

## Waiting for Saint Philip

Like the Ethiopian eunuch, the people in my congregations are looking for someone to guide their reading. Philip is the ideal. He is led by the Spirit (v. 29) and willing to climb in the chariot and share the reader's journey through the wilderness. Most of all, perhaps, Philip can offer a Big Story. (At seminary or university I would have called it a "meta-narrative," but now I think Big Story is much better.) Verse 35 says that Philip started with the passage from Isaiah in question and then "proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." Philip places the little scrap of Scripture in the big picture that is the gospel. We do not know what Big Story Philip offers, but it is powerful. It leads to action—the eunuch stops the chariot and is baptized. And it is empowering. The eunuch is not dependent on Philip. Even after the Spirit snatches Philip away, the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing (v. 39). I feel safe in the assumption that he now understands what he reads.



Most of the people in my congregations are hungry for a Big Story like that, and I think that hunger is widespread. I attribute part of the success of Fundamentalist churches to the power and coherence of their Big Story. You know the story: All of us are sinners and deserve to die, but Jesus dies instead of us, and you can be part of "us" if you believe in him. This story can accommodate huge amounts of Scripture and life experience, and it is widely held. But many in the church (I am one of this number) find the Fundamentalist story inadequate at best. Relevant to this chapter, it has done much to uphold the Cult of Meaning. Despite widespread opposition to this story, I know of no current alternative that can match its power, scope, and coherence. I think that the left wing of the church has resisted developing a rival Big Story for many reasons. The postmodern temperament seeks the local and particular and resists universal claims. I am among those who are deeply ambivalent about too much coherence. But even those who seek overarching connections will find impediments. The emphasis on the pericope as the basic unit of analysis in biblical studies and preaching as they are taught in mainline seminaries lends itself to disjointed preaching and teaching. Many of us are not familiar enough with what the Bible says for connections to arise naturally in the process of preparing a sermon. Whether we regard a new Big Story with longing or suspicion (or a mixture of the two), I do not think we have one.

## "For They Shall All Know Me . . ."

While the eunuch had no one to guide his reading, the real issue facing the faithful readers in Dundee and Weston is that there are so *many* people trying to be their guides. Countless candidates are clambering to get into their chariots and teach them what Scripture means. The people in my congregations encounter interpreters of Scripture on TV, on the radio, in devotionals and Sunday school curricula, and in conversation with friends both inside and outside the church. Sometimes the interpretation is not even obviously interpretation, as in the case of *The Living Bible*. This situation

is intensified in a rural area where clergy turnover is high. One person said to me something like, "Well, you say this, but our last minister said that, and on TV I hear something else entirely. In the end you've just got to make up your own mind."

The theme of "making up your own mind" is one I hear again and again when I press people as to why they interpret a passage of Scripture as they do. In a highly unscientific survey of one Bible study, nine out of ten members said that their own conscience is their final guide in interpreting Scripture. The tenth said that she would defer to the session. Many critics of our culture (Bellah et al.) would dismiss "making up your own mind" as a kind of consumerism of ideas, a process that is ultimately either random or self-serving. John Henry Cardinal Newman, whose application of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch to the modern situation inspired my story, reaches a conclusion that people need an authoritative guide to save them from their own interpretations.

I see people making interpretative decisions with more integrity. They are almost always able to give reasons for why they decided as they did and argue intelligently with someone who has reached a different conclusion. The reasons often depend on the ability of a particular understanding to account for many details of the passage being discussed—the more that can be worked into the explanation and the less that must be left out, the better. People also test interpretations against whatever fragments of a Big Story (or, more commonly, Big Stories) they operate with. The dominant story is usually the Fundamentalist one, even among liberals, but many other stories, both indigenous to the church and imported, are at work. There is also an important personal, relational element in most accounts. The character of the interpreter and the person's relationship to the interpreter are often of decisive importance.

A pervasive feature of the process I am describing is that people start off deciding between different interpretations of passages of Scripture. Reading the passage is, initially, only incidental to this process. People are choosing between different interpretations because, as I argue above, they rarely have satisfying encounters with the Bible that are mediated solely by the Holy Spirit. Their



most important encounters are with sermons, devotions, and other secondary materials that try to give the propositional meaning of the passage. I am not trying to make a rigid, abstract distinction between "text" and "interpretation." I am pointing instead to a more concrete distinction between reading the Bible and listening to a sermon. People sometimes tell me that they doze while Scripture is read and then wake up when the sermon starts (this is intended as a compliment).

But while people often *begin* by deciding between candidates for interpretation, the conflict between those candidates can drive people back to the criteria by which they will "make up their own mind." I have seen conflict lead people back to a passage, eager to see for themselves if an interpretation makes sense. Having to decide between conflicting interpretations pushes people to test and develop, on a case-by-case basis, their Big Story fragments. Conflicts in our Bible studies have moved people to reflect on character—not just the character of the individual candidates for Philip's role, but also what makes for a good, faithful life in Christ. And I have seen the need to decide between candidates force people to pray. Conflict between potential authorities can drive people to transforming encounters with God that are unmediated by any earthly authority.

And so I want to suggest that we, as Christians (and especially as Protestant Christians), have good reasons not to resist the fragmentation of our age as evil in itself. Fragmentation can be a kind of medicine for the church, and we resist it only at great moral cost. At present we could not gain coherence in the church without some kind of strong coercion, and we could not maintain it without some form of tyranny. If we want coherence today, it will have to be imposed—as Newman knew. I reject such imposition as the follower of a Christ who was the only One worthy to impose coherence and who chose, at the cost of his life, not to do so.

Accepting fragmentation does not mean abandoning people to it. Conflict about interpretation can just as easily lead people to close themselves to any kind of divine encounter as to open themselves. It can make them less likely to read Scripture and pray with

honesty rather than more likely to do so, and it often happens. The church must do the crucial work of bringing people back into contact with Scripture, undermining the Cult of Meaning and all that keeps people from reading well (or at all) and cultivating the virtues that will make reading Scripture fruitful. The qualities that make for a good reader of Scripture—patience, humility, attentiveness, openness to God—make for a good disciple. And the kind of community that can read well together—marked by the centrality of the Word, honesty, and a willingness to call one another to account in love—is well on its way to being a good church.

The essential virtue in this time of fragmentation is hope. Our hope is in the living God, a God with particular qualities, a God who is one way and not another. A great temptation is to give up the effort to discern between better and worse attempts to play Saint Philip, to quietly slip out the back of the chariot and abandon it and the journey itself to all the shouting interpreters. An equally great temptation is to pull one candidate for Philip into the chariot and keep all others at bay by force. Both temptations come from a failure of hope in God—the one gives up all hope, and the other transfers hope to an earthly interpreter. But as members of a church on which the Holy Spirit has been poured out, we have good reason to hope that God, who gave the Word, can make the Word life-giving for all people, without any intermediary but Christ, the Word made flesh, and without any interpreter but the Spirit. It is an eschatological hope for a reality we enjoy only in fits and starts in this fragmented age. It is the hope of the new covenant:

> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:33–34)

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# 9

## SERMON: "IT'S ALL IN THE NAME" (GEN. 22:1–19)

ADELIA KELSO

Some years ago, my brother Harry, my parents, and I were on a summer vacation. We drove through Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where my mother grew up and where her parents are buried. We went by the cemetery to visit my grandparents' graves. My brother's name is Harry Hoffman Kelso, and that day, as he stood at the grave of his grandfather, Harry Otto Hoffman, he pointed to it and said, "I'm named for that man." (You need to know that Harry was at the height of what I called his "geekdom," and this entire episode was witnessed by his little sister who looked on him with a distinctly disdainful eye, of which she has since repented!)

My thoughts as I stood beside my brother and heard such enlightened commentary was, "Well, duh!" I didn't think that his statement was important until years later, but it does tell us that in order to know and understand Harry Hoffman Kelso, we have to ask the questions "Who was Harry Otto Hoffman? And what did he mean for Hattiesburg, Mississippi? And what did he mean and what does he mean to Harry Hoffman Kelso?"

Later on, I began to ask, "Who am I? Who is Adelia Dorothy Kelso?" Well, my grandmother was Dorothy and her sister and grandmother were Adelia, and every Adelia in my family is called Dedie. That's MY story, MY family, who I am. That's the starting point to get into knowing me and who I am.