THE BIG PICTURE

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Category: Observations

How much do we need to know about what is really going on?

As I've mentioned before, Philip is one of the characters in the Bible who fascinates me the most. In Acts 8 we see him involved in three different mission outreaches.

Firstly, fleeing persecution, he went to Samaria. While he was there he taught people about Jesus, worked miracles and saw many people respond to his message. There doesn't appear to have been any advance planning about his going to Samaria, he went there to save his skin, but he made the best of the circumstances.

While things were still going well in Samaria, an angel told Philip to go down to the desert road where he met an Ethiopian official who had just been to visit Jerusalem. Philip got the Ethiopian involved in an evangelistic Bible study and led him to the Lord.

The next thing we see is that Philip 'appeared in Azotus' where he preached about Jesus. We know less about this incident than the other two - though every time I stand in an airport security queue the idea of 'appearing' somewhere becomes very attractive.

Philip was guided by an angel to meet the Ethiopian, while he ended up in Samaria apparently at random. However, there was something that linked these two events; the people he spoke to were not Jews. The Samaritans were closely related to the Jewish people, but there was a significant degree of hostility between them. The Ethiopian was obviously interested in Jewish religion and very sympathetic to it - but he wasn't a Jew. In each case, the people had some link to Judaism, but, crucially, they weren't Jewish.

This is important, because up till this point all of the believers had been Jews. Even on the day of Pentecost, the crowds who became believers were from the Jewish diaspora. In Acts 8, we have the first people who were not Jewish coming to faith in Jesus. This was a radical step and its no wonder that Peter and John came from Jerusalem to Samaria to check on what Philip was getting up to.

More importantly, God was slowly and patiently opening up the Christian community to the idea of Gentiles being a part of it. A couple of chapters later, God gave Peter a vision and led him to the family of Cornelius a God fearing Roman and then in chapter 11, we finally have people spontaneously reaching out to Gentiles.

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This is a good illustration of a tension which exists in all Christian mission work. Should we try to discern how God is at work in our situation so that we can orientate our efforts in the best way or should we simply get on with whatever tasks we see in front of us and let God take care of the big picture. Some personalities prefer one approach to the other and some of us drift between them

according to the situation.

Which do you tend to do?