

The Desire to Be a Belonger

Acts 8:26-40

The incident of the Ethiopian Eunuch is one of a process that has its climax in the 15th chapter of the book of Acts. The 15th chapter of Acts records one of those church meetings that we all (or at least I) hate to attend—not in spite of the fact that it was a church meeting but because of it. Church meetings can be the most inciting of all. They knew that it was going to be rough. They knew that was going to be confrontational. I don't do well in that setting. I rather be doing something else and then come back and asked how did he go. I wish I would've been there.

This was a single issue meeting. The issue was clear; are we going to continue to admit into full standing in fellowship with the church foreigners, persons who have never belonged to the people of Israel, persons who do not know the Old Testament, the story of creation, who do not have the moral and ethical standards of Israel, who do not know the tradition of the Exodus. People who yesterday worshipped before shrines and idols. Shall we simply upon the repentance and baptism in Jesus name and receiving the Holy Ghost admit them in to fellowship? Is that enough? That was the question. The people were divided.

Luke said, there was much debate (disputing). He said no small dissension arose among them.

It was not so much that Christians disagreed with each other, but individual Christians disagreed with themselves—their own hearts were torn, and sometimes when we lash out at someone else because of their position the reason for the intensity is that we are at war with ourselves, and when people are at war with themselves they tend to make casualties even out of the persons they love.

I know that was the truth of Peter. He asked himself, “How should I vote?” Oh when he stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached it look good, there was a big crowd. They were from every nation under heaven: Parthians, Meds, Elamites, and dwellers of Mesopotamia, from everywhere they came. Peter was carried away in his oratory and when he finished the sermon he said, “This promise is not only to you and to your children but all that are afar off—Gentiles—as many as our God shall call—Gentiles”! It was a great thing! Then he had a vision to go

to the house of a Gentile and preach. It is one thing to preach but it's another thing to do. He said no. Peter was divided in his own heart.

Paul said he was. At the Fellowship dinner at Antioch he started eating with Gentiles but some others came in and he with Barnabas and some Jews found a separate table. It was a painful thing for the church and for Paul and I'm sure for Simon Peter himself because it is one thing to say I know that we should include these people but it is another thing to believe in the heart that we should include these people. The longest trip is between the head "I know" and the heart "I know" and in between there was no small dissension. There was much debate so they argued.

Mr. Chairman!

Yes we are from Antioch and we have a wonderful church and we been studying Ezra and we believe the Bible and Ezra said, get rid of the foreigner even if you're married to one. That's all I wanted to say. Thank you!

Mr. Chairman!

We're from Berrea and we also have a nice church and we had been studying the Bible also. We have been studying the book of Ruth. Such a wonderful woman! She was ancestress of David and ancestress of our Lord. If our Lord had Moabite blood in His veins isn't it okay for us to do this? Thank you!

Mr. Chairman!

Well, I don't know but one of the greatest prophets was Amos and Amos said you alone—talking to the Jews—you alone. Do I have to define alone? He doesn't say etcetera, it says alone have I chosen from among all the nations—you alone. Thank you!

Mr. Chairman!

Yes, I don't have anything to say but I remember when I was just a child I memorize the Bible verse about—I don't know—I can't say it now but the mountain of the Lord's house shall be the highest of all the mountains and all the nations—all the nations—I think it says all the nations shall flow into it. Thank you!

Oh me, I would rather be doing anything else.

And whose fault was it? I mean here the church is, just doing great and multiplying and spreading and then this. It's just going to split us wide-open they thought and everything was going so well. They began to speculate. He whose fault is it?

It was Steven's. When he made that speech against the Temple in Jerusalem that's what started it. Now he was appointed to wait tables but he thought he had to preach—everybody wants to preach that's what started it.

No it's Philip. He went out and baptized some of the Samaritans and when you let the Samaritans in the camel's nose is in the tent.

No it's Peter. He doesn't want us to know about it, but I happen to know because I have a sister who lives in Caesarea that he ate with some Italians. Yeah, yeah the word is out! And we are supposed to think of him as one of our leaders and apostle.

Isn't it really Paul? He's running around here claiming this vision and claiming to be an apostle of the Gentiles. He just takes in everybody—sure just come on in! And look at the churches he builds; all of people just jumping around, running the Isles, the first strand of the first song in there on their feet and they actually amen preaching and teaching. He lets in anyone and that is when it turns sour.

I really think that it was Barnabas. Bless his heart, he is such a fine person, but you know how we all agreed in Jerusalem that if Paul ever showed up here, he can fellowship with us, he can take communion with us but he is not to preach, but Barnabas took him around and working man and pretty soon there he was preaching. Now Barnabas should not have done that—he knows better.

Whose fault is it?

Luke says that the fault was God's. God's Spirit came to push the church be on the ethnic, economic and cultural borders. The Spirit of God pushed the church.

There is actually another view of the Book of Acts besides the traditional one that we normally take. We can notice that every once in a while Luke turns the camera around and lets it focus on one of the outsiders whose future was at stake.—one of the persons whose fate is being debated by the church. Shall we let them in or keep

them out. Luke turns the camera on some of these (such as Cornelius) what does it mean to the person on the outside, waiting upon the word of the church, how did it go, will I be admitted or not? And the strangest of all the stories is that of the Ethiopian Eunuch, in his chariot from Jerusalem to Gaza and Philip is commissioned by God to speak to him.

An Ethiopian

Ethiopia has been from the days of home are a symbol for the end of the world. The jumping off place. We would say Timbuktu. It was as far out and distant and out of the way as you can be. He is in Ethiopian.

And he was a Eunuch.

A Eunuch.

A Eunuch was a man who by accident or by surgery was rendered sexless. Usually such an individual found gainful and sometimes powerful employment in palaces, especially in the service of Queens. For being sexless they were not derailed by their own private interests. They were harmless around the harem. They never had to be late because of family obligations. They had no wife, no children, nothing to distract them. They were devoted, single-minded, and loyal. They were very useful for such occasions.

Plutarch says it was very common.

Josephus said one nasty thing about Herod was that he had three Eunuchs in his palace even though the Jewish Scripture was very clear: “the eunuch shall not be permitted in the assembly of the people of God” (Deuteronomy 23:1). Then what does it mean when it says that he had been up to Jerusalem to worship? What kind of a man is this who would walk around the outside, stand at the edge, look over the fence, ask people: What’s going on? How was the service? How was the sermon? What did the Minister do? Were many people there? He was peeking through knot holes, getting things secondhand, walking on the edge of the crowd, worship?

Why would any human being continue to knock on a locked door and stand there with bloody knuckles and refuse to go home, why? The door is locked, you are not

welcome. Isn't that clear? Why doesn't he make it easy on himself? Is he one of those individuals who believe that if you rise to a certain place of wealth and power than half the longer apply to you? He is a wealthy man. He has his own Bible. He must be wealthy. He is in the chariot. He is in the service of the Queen of the Ethiopians. He is the treasurer of the country. Maybe he thinks the rules do not apply to him anymore. I don't know. He certainly needs to make it easy on himself. He is simply increasing the pain, lingering at the edge of the people of God that verse staring him in the face day and night. Why does he do it? Even if the careless usher admitted him accidentally he wouldn't fit in. The moment he got inside it would be obvious to everyone and to himself he wouldn't fit in. You don't fit in, even if we let you and you will not fit in.

I think all of us have had at one time or another a feeling sweep over us but no one wants me. That is a horrible, horrible feeling. That is the feeling that the Ethiopian Eunuch must have had.

And unfortunately this attitude of the early church is still all too common an attitude in the church today.

A minister who I greatly admire told of the first church that he pastored before he was married. He said the area where the pastor began to boom. People were coming in tents, trailers, lean-to's and temporary carts covering the beautiful hills. There was washing hanging on fences and children running around. The little church was nearby. The pastor said we need to reach out to these people. They are right here. Here is our mission.

Somebody said, I don't think so.

The pastor asked why.

Because they won't fit in. After all they are only here temporarily. They are fly-by-night. They won't stay. They're not solid.

Well said the pastor, they still need the gospel and they still need a church.

But the people said no. And the church had a business meeting and a resolution was proposed that was only opposed by the pastor and one other person. The

resolution was that members will be allowed in this church only if they owned property in the county. All others won't fit in.

Many years later the pastor went back with his wife and found the church. The church was just like it was except cars and trucks were parked everywhere. And there was a big sign which read, "Barbecue all-you-can-eat, chicken, ribs and pork."

The pastor said well we might as well go in for lunch. So they went inside. The pews were there, but people were sitting on them waiting for a table. The beautiful pulpit was there only as a decoration and a place for the hostess to stand totake the names of people waiting for a table.. The organ also was a declaration. There are all kinds of people that were there reminiscent of Meads, and Partheons, Elamites and dwellers of Mesopotamia.

The pastor said that it's a good thing that this is not a church anymore or these people would not be welcome.

They won't fit in!

Mahatma Gandhi, who later gained world attention says in his autobiography that in his student days he was truly interested in the Bible. He was deeply touched by reading the Gospels and he seriously considered becoming a convert to Christianity. From reading the Scriptures he said that Christianity seem to offer the real solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. One Sunday he went to a nearby church to attend services. He decided to see the minister and asked for instructions as to the way of salvation and enlightenment on other doctrines. But when he entered the sanctuary the ushers refuse to give him a seat and suggested that he go to worship with his own people. He left that he never came back. "If Christians have cast differences also," he said to himself, "I might as well remain a Hindu."

Christians may have a caste system but Jesus does not have a caste system!

Some churches are like that. Some folks just don't fit in. They will not include just anyone. Every once in a while we get the idea that some folks think that everything would go along just fine if it were not for people. People interrupt them, people

bother them, people bring problems to them, people take up their time, but people is what it's all about.

The teacher who complains about his or her students forgets that their job is to teach people.

The doctor who is impatient with his or her patients forgets that his commission is to heal people.

The merchant that gripes about people forgets that his or her business depends on all on how well he or she serves people.

The minister who is bothered by people forgets that his calling is to be a pastor and to preach to people.

And the church that is so exclusive that some are not welcome should remember that the commission of the church is to meet the needs of people. We are to teach people. We are witness to people. We are to lead people into deeper spiritual experiences. We are to disciple people. People, that's what it's all about. But there are some churches that never see that. Therefore:

Some churches have parking problems, some other churches don't.

Some churches have kids running around making a lot of noise, some other churches tend to be very quiet.

Some churches usually have more expenses than money, some other churches don't really need to spend much money.

Some churches are growing so fast you don't always know everyone's name, in some other churches everyone has known everyone's name for years.

Some churches enthusiastically and generously support missions, some other churches keep it all at home.

Some churches are filled with tithers, some other churches are filled with tippers.

Some churches evangelize, some other churches fossilize.

Some churches are always planning for the future, some other churches live in the past.

Some churches seek new ministries and new methods, some other churches do not need to.

Some say there are those who just don't fit in!

Why does the Ethiopian Eunuch keep doing it? He has been to Jerusalem to worship and now he's reading the Bible. You know what he's doing? He's flipping the pages of the Bible to find his own name. Everybody in the world wants that. I want to find my name. A verse that says me and I write it in the margin. That verse is who I am, just a little promise, just a phrase, just a something. He's looking for his name. Something that says God knows me.

A man tragically lost his son and in talking about it kept saying that it is God's will. Someone said please don't say that. And he asked why, what is the alternative, that it was an accident? I would rather think that God knew my son and had something for him. So even in death we want to know that God knows us. I go to prepare a place for you would want to be able to say that's me.

The Ethiopian is reading in Isaiah and he finds it. It's almost too good to be true. There it says it:

No longer let the foreigner say surely the Lord will separate me from his people. No longer let the Eunuch say I am but a dry tree, for thus saith the Lord God the day is coming when the Eunuch who hears my voice, and obeys my laws, and keeps my covenant, I will give them a place in my house and I will give them the name, and it shall be to him as generation and generations and generation of children, better than sons and daughters it shall be to the Eunuch (Isaiah 56).

He reads in Isaiah 53:7-8, as a lamb is...Who will declare his generation? He was cut off out of the land of the living. He had no children. He had no generation. He had no one to remember him. He had no one to carry on his name. He was cut off—killed without any children. Who is going to declare justice for him?

Philip asks, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

"No I have no one to help me, but I found some good things here. Is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?"

And Phillips said, "Let me tell you who that is, it's Jesus."

You mean he was cut off without children. He didn't have any generation. Do you mean this verse up here, and I know that I'm just an Ethiopian, but no grandchildren, no people to keep his name, he was cut off from the land of the living. It says here, "no longer let the foreigners say surely the Lord will say get out." And I know I'm just a Eunuch and I know what it says in Deuteronomy but it says in Isaiah "no longer let the Eunuch say I'm just a dry tree. I will bless you and you will be remembered and will be better than children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren forever."

"Philip do you suppose it's possible? I know I'm only an Ethiopian. I know I'm only a Eunuch. But could I belong to the church. Here is water Philip can I be baptized?"

Philip said yes. I can think of 100 people that will be upset, but yes. I don't know how this is going to go over, but yes. In fact I'm surprised at myself, but yes. In fact one might say no but it is clear that God has already said yes. You can be included.

Everyone has the desire to be a believer!

David once asked a stranger he met "to whom belongest thou." That seems a strange greeting, but it does underscore a basic human need. We have a desire to belong.

So in our minds eye we see a man with a hopeless look on his face. His name is Cain. What is his real curse? He belongs to no family. There is no one left to call him brother. He belongs to nothing, nobody, he doesn't even belong to God. He is no longer a believer.

Why did Judas hang himself? Was it because he had once belonged to the great circle of disciples and by his betrayal he no longer belonged? Even the enemy into whose hands he was played wouldn't take him.

Everybody wants to belong but they don't always want to include everyone.

It's so easy to love people in the abstract. It's easy to love people far away but not so easy so often to love the person next door. There was a professor of psychology who although we had no children of his own whenever he saw a neighbor scold the

child for some wrongdoing he would say, “you should love your boy, not punishment him.” One hot summer afternoon the professor was doing some repair work on the concrete driveway leading to his garage. Tired out after several hours of work, he laid down the trowel, wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and started toward the house. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a mischievous little boy putting his foot into fresh cement. He rushed over, grabbed him, and was about to spank him severely when a neighbor leaned from a window and said, “Watch it, Professor! Don’t you remember? You must love the child!?” At this he yelled back furiously, “I do love him in the abstract but not in the concrete!”

An old legend says that one day Abraham was standing by his tent door when he saw an old man coming along the way, weary with his journey and with bleeding feet. With true hospitality he invited the old man to share his meal and to lodge with him for the night. Abraham noticed that he asked no blessing on the meal and inquired why she did not pray to the God of heaven. The old man said, “I am a fire worshiper and I acknowledge no other God.” At this, Abraham grew angry and sent him from his tent. Then God called Abraham and asked, “where is the old man who came to you?” Abraham answer, “I thrust him out because he did not worship you.” Then God said, “I have cared for him for over 100 years even though he has dishonored me. Could you not have endured him one night and so prove to him God’s love?”

God wants us to develop a ministering heart. We must become concerned with others. Yes, this does bring hurt sometimes.

Cultivate blindness and you will never see the ugly but you will never see the sunset either.

Cultivate deafness and you will never hear discord but you’ll never hear Symphony either.

Never love and you will never be hurt but you’ll miss so much of the joys that can only come that way. The world needs you and others need you. Somewhere there is someone that needs you to minister to them.

In the book, in his steps, author Charles M Sheldon movingly portrays our young lady from the upper register of society takes outcasts, alcoholic girl into her fashionable to live, against the wishes of her horrified, aristocratic grandmother. She did it because she wanted to minister to this girl. She wanted to have a ministering heart.

Whether she knew it or not, Virginia was obeying Paul's command, "Receive the one another, as Christ also received us" (Romans 15:7). Also she was following the example of Christ with His dealings on earth with teeming humanity. He welcomed outcasts, outsiders and outlaws. If the exalted Lord Jesus Christ received us in our unlovely status, should we not likewise welcome the unacceptable?

Did you ever stop to think how lonely God would be if the only folks He loved were those as good as He?

During his ministry Jesus rubs shoulders with rich rulers and poor widows. He accepted invitations to dinner at the home of the self-righteous Pharisee Simon and the penitent publican Matthew. He fellowshiped with adults, but took babies and children in his arms. Multitudes moved him to compassion but he had time to reach out to an individual. A large share of his energies were devoted to the sick, while still directing much effort to those that were healthy. He paid attention to both white-collar lawyers and menial fishermen. His wide receptivity was foreshadowed in his infancy when poor shepherds and rich Wiseman came to adore him.

Human nature often fawns before the ruler, the rich, the righteous, the mature, the robust and the respectable, at the same time slighting those on the lower social rung.

I believe that the Lord is against any attitude that excludes people from belonging to his church. We need to think about why He cleansed the Temple. Those moneychangers and merchants were in the court of the Gentiles and that was the only place connected with the Temple that a Gentile could go. They couldn't be a part of the service but they could pray in the court of the Gentiles. That's where Cornelius worshiped that's where the Ethiopian eunuch worshiped. But they could not pray with these moneychangers there. They would not have been able to pray even if they wanted to. The Lord cleansed the Temple because the Lord fights any attitude or action on the part of any person who endeavors to take Jesus' church

and tries to fashion it into any other image except the Lord's image. The Lord wants everyone to be a believer.

The Lord established his church as inclusive. There was to be:

A place for women.

It was Christianity and the church that lifted women out of a place of abuse and servitude into a place of usefulness and discipleship. The Lord said "I can use men and I can use women." And God did use women. Think about Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and many more. Women not only listened to his teachings but ministered to his material needs. Even women who were ostracized by society were recognized by Him. Women followed Him on his last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, aided Him on the way to the cross, watched His burial, prepared spices for His interment, were first at the tomb on the resurrection morn and were the first to announce His rising from the dead. Certainly womanhood was lifted to the status before unknown in the history of their sex by the Lord's attitude toward them. The Lord said "I want them included."

A place for children.

The Lord wanted children included. We took those children into his arms and bless them. He said, "suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

It's sad that some people want no bus ministry—don't want children running around. Yes there is a little commotion with our children around but this is the sound of the future. Older people are the church of yesterday. Young people are the church and today. The children are the church of tomorrow. Children are the church's insurance policy against death. As long as we have children the church will never die. The Lord said I want them included.

There needs to be a place for the sick, and the infirm, and the depressed.

The Lord wants us to minister to people in need. God wants us to touch people at the point of need. He wants these people included.

There needs to be a place for the poor.

I don't think the Lord is pleased if we look at people is only a tithe check. Only what they can do for the church makes them important. The Lord made it abundantly clear that the poor had a large place in his heart. When John the Baptist asked proof of Jesus' Messiahship, Jesus replied, "tell him that the poor have the gospel preached to them."

There needs to be a place for the working class.

In some circles people, perhaps unwittingly, give greater honor to white-collar, professional people than to the people who work in overalls. Yet, for His first four disciples, our Lord called fishermen, not executive sitting behind glass top desks.

Oh listen! Working man or woman you do not have to be educated to be wise. God is just as interested in the man or woman who earns their bread by the sweat of their brow as He is anyone else.

The Lord wants those with records of shame included.

The dying thief was pardoned by the Lord. A man with a prison record found a welcome from the Savior.

I have done prison ministry, I remember baptized the prisoner once who had really had an experience. He asked me would I be welcome in your church? Jesus said the church's answer should be yes.

Also we have those in church with records of shame. We never let them live it down. We are harder on people than God is. We should allow people to live things down. We need to practice them ministry of restoration. If God has a sea of forgetfulness we should at least have a pond.

The Lord wants sinners included.

In a certain town there was a great problem with prostitution. Because of their profession these girls were made to submit to health checks. A young man there at the clinic, a worker, asked some of them come to church. A few weeks later a half a dozen of them hesitantly walked into the morning service. At the end when no one spoke to them they left hurriedly. They returned the next Sunday but soon there was an uproar. The righteous ladies of the congregation were up in arms.

They did want these women today are coming to their church. Word indirectly reached the girls and they never came back.

The Lord's pattern would show the attitude of these church ladies to be un-Christlike. While on earth, the Lord accepted the woman of Samaria who had five previous husbands and was at the time living with a man who was not her husband. Rather than withdraw from this stained soul, He led her to believe on Himself as the water of life and so that she became a flaming witness to her own townsfolk who knew her unsavory reputation very well. Jesus said on one occasion to the religious but self-righteous leaders, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom before you (Matthew 21:31). When a woman caught in the very act of adultery was dragged before him, he forgave her repentant soul.

No wonder the hymn writer penned,

Sinners Jesus will receive;

Sound this word of grace to wall

Who the heavenly pathway leave,

all who linger, all who fall.

Because the Lord Jesus Christ extended a loving welcome to outcasts, outsiders and outlaws, every Christian is better to the lowest, the least, the last and the lost.

A minister told the story. But he visited his sister, a director of patient service for the children's unit of the large Southern California hospital. She was conducting him on a tour through that unit. All the time there was ringing through the halls the cry of a baby coming from one of the rooms. Finally, they came to that room. It was a little child, about a year old, covered with terrible bruises, scratches, scars, from head to toe.

The minister said at first I assumed the child had been involved in the terrible accident. Then I looked closely at its legs. Written in ink all over them were obscenities. The minister said that the sister told him that the child was the victim, not of an accident, but of its parents. Its internal injuries were so severe that it couldn't keep any food down. The scars in the bottom of its feet were burns caused by cigarettes.

“If you’ve ever had trouble visualizing the consequences of human indifference,” he said, “the perversion of life’s basic relationships, what God himself is up against in this world of ours, I wish you could’ve looked with me at that battered, crying baby!”

“But,” he said, “I want to tell you what happened then.” He Said, “his sister leaned over the crib, and very carefully and tenderly lifted the trial, and held it next herself. At first the child screamed all the more, as if its innocent nature had come to be suspicious of every touch. But as she held it securely and warmly, the baby slowly began to quiet down. And finally, in spite of wounds and hurts and past experiences, it felt the need to cry no more.

We are dealing with battered, beaten babies, beaten by the world. They desire to belong to something besides bars, cigarettes, dope, immorality....

The Lord is saying to the church I want you to include these people. I want them to belong.

Jesus didn’t take out time to pay His taxes but He tarried long beside a water well with a Woman of Samaria. He ran from those who would make Him King but He withstood the jeers and criticism of the multitudes to sit at meat with publicans and sinners. He refused to court the favor of kings. He never spoke for Himself but there suspended between heaven and earth He turned all of His attention to a dying thief. The reason? Their souls were lost.

If the main concern of Jesus was the souls of men—if His last act was to win a soul—His last command was to win souls—His last prayer was for the forgiveness of souls if we are His Church our main concern must be for souls. A member of the church without a burden for souls is the heartache of heaven and the laughing stock of hell.

God is not pleased with an exclusive church. He wants the church to say:

To all who need comfort;

To all who want friendship;

To those who desire acceptance;

To all who want sheltering love;

To those who sin and need a Savior;

And whosoever will come—this church opens wide its doors, and in the name of Our Lord says, WELCOME!

I remember dealing with someone who had a terrible life of sin. He asked me, I'm washed up aren't I?

I said no!

You would want someone like me in your church which you?

I said yes!

Can I belong?

I said yes, thou mayest!

You can belong. Here is an altar. Here is Water. Here is God's Spirit.