

Learning and Discipleship

May 2, 2021 Scott Gunn

[Philip] asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” [The Ethiopian eunuch] replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” – Acts 8:30b-31

These days, we love shortcuts. As a society, we’re not very patient, so if there’s a quick way to do something, that’s usually our preference. It’s no different in church.

In discipleship, there are no shortcuts. If you want a prayer life, then spend time in prayer. If you wished you knew more of the scriptures, spend time reading the Bible. If you wished you felt more generous, lead your heart there by giving away some money.

Often, when we tell the story of the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, we focus on the eunuch’s question, *“What is to prevent me from being baptized?”* I’ve heard this story told many times to suggest that we should baptize anyone, any time, with no preparation. But that’s a shortcut.

The eunuch is coming back from Jerusalem, where he has been at worship. He is already reading the scriptures. And then he asks to be taught by Philip. The eunuch is baptized after a time of preparation and teaching.

Teaching others about our faith isn’t optional. We all remember the first part of the Great Commission, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19). But there’s another verse that’s part of our charge as well: *“...and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”* (v. 20a). Jesus instructs us to teach others about the things he has commanded us.

We have our work cut out for us. Though the average American household has four Bibles, we don’t read them much. According to a 2013 Barna Group poll, 8% of Americans believe that “Noah was married to Joan of Arc” and a further 15% aren’t sure. The same poll tells us that 14% of Americans believe that Sodom and Gomorrah were married, with another 22% not sure. Forward Movement’s own RenewalWorks data tell us that most Episcopalians haven’t read the Bible much. Too many of us have tried to take shortcuts, and not just around reading the Bible.

I mention all this not to shame anyone. Rather, my point is that the need for more learning and teaching is evident. People who are familiar with basic theological concepts such as grace are more likely to be growing spiritually, according to RenewalWorks data.

I pray that we, like Philip, will be quick to teach others our faith and ready to welcome people into the church. There aren’t shortcuts, but the work of teaching and learning leads to a life of deep joy in the peace of Christ.